

*Fieldwork Recordings—Dictionary of American Regional English*  
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**Transcript of DARE Interview (1967): Smith Center, Kansas; Primary Informant  
KS005 (Tape 0525-S1)**

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INTRODUCTION: The following was recorded from Dictionary of American Regional English, tape zero five two five, side one.

5 FIELDWORKER: This is a recording of Mr. Emmett [beep] made at Smith Center, Kansas, on October thirty-first, nineteen sixty-seven by [beep]. OK Mr. [beep], do you want to tell me now the story of this song "Home on the Range" that came from around here?

10 INFORMANT: Yes Mr. [beep] I'd like to visit with you about something that happened in our county quite a number of years ago, in fact about eighteen seventy-two. A Dr. Higley, uh, who was a medical doctor come to our county and homesteaded that year, and uh, he was a rather an eccentric or a rather interesting character, did, uh, pra-, he practiced, uh, his profession among the early settlers of this county. One of his hobbies was writing poems and among those poems that he wrote was, uh, a poem with approximately five verses. And it was first called, uh, the "Western Home." He, uh, let this poem lay around his house for a number of months but took it down to his neighbor as he called him his buddy, uh, Dan Kelley. And said, "Dan, what do you think of this as a poem?" And, uh, Mr. Kelley, who was a, an old bandmaster in the Civil War, read 15 it over a number of times, hummed it, and he said, "Well, Doc I believe I can, uh, turn this poem into a song." And, he did. And he, uh, took the poem home with him and, uh, on a foolscap he wrote it out in the uh, notes and worked it over a number of times, and, uh, his brother-in-law, eh, his two brother-in-laws, uh, Gene, uh, Harlan and, uh, Cal Harlan had what they call an orchestra they played at, uh, country dances. And they took this, uh, we might call a piece of 20 paper, foolscap as we called it at those times, and to a country dance, and it was first played in Keystone, uh, Township in Osborne County, it was just, is a county south of Smith County. And it was quite popular that time, sang and played over this area. Then it was forgotten, practically and, uh, heard n-, unheard of, only just in a way the cowboys had picked it up, and a number of people, and, uh, played it and sang it, they called it one su- one, uh, kind of a, a verse they'd pick up and uh, go along with it and the first thing you'd know, why, it's called, uh, "My Arizona Home," 25 "Colorado Home," "Kansas Home."

FIELDWORKER: It had all those various {names?}

INFORMANT: Yes}, it had those versions. And, uh, the originality of the song was, was forgotten. And during the time of, uh, one of the first press conferences of, uh, Franklin Roosevelt, uh, with  
30 these news reporters, why, they was waiting on the President to appear before them, and they sang this song. (xx) appeared he told the men, he said, "Boys, that's my favorite song." Well of course it immediately become a popular song. And, uh, was sang to audiences and on radio and, uh, an individual or two individuals, man and wife, from Texas threatened suit of the National Broadcasting Company for quite a sizable amount of money, claiming they were the authors and  
35 they were using this, uh, song without the-their permission. Well, they, the broadcasting company immediately got busy and sent their lawyer, who was a young man named Moanfeldt, and told him to find out all he could about the song, where it originated, the author if possible, and all those things. After traveling approximately six thousand miles by, uh, train and automobile he put a personal in the uh, Kansas City *Star* asking if anyone there could tell him or  
40 at least give him a hint where the "Home on the Range" might've originated. There was a lady in Kansas City that called him at his hotel and told him to come to Smith Center and he'd find out everything about the song that was, that he wanted. He immediately come to Smith Center and contacted the editor of our paper, a Mr. Bert [beep]. And Mr. [beep] said, "Sure, I can give you all the information that you care for." They ransacked through their papers and come up with a  
45 copy of the song that is in the Kans-, uh, Kirwin *Mirror* and, uh, with the, all of the verses, it was called there "The Western Home." And he took that, then he contacted Mr. and Mrs. Harlan, and they sang the song for him and Mr. Harlan played his mandolin, and he wired back to his company, and they, he—before that he took a recording of their voices— and he wired his, uh, company, then he says, "I've got everything we need now." And, uh, course that gives them all  
50 the proof, the individuals simply dropped out of sight (xx) suit. But, the, uh, song itself has appeared all, and been sang all over the world. The cabin, where the, the poem was written by Dr. Higley still stands, and it was rebuilt in nineteen fifty-two and part of the original building was standing at the time, but they rebuilt it and made it habitable, used now as a museum and is privately owned by Mr. Pete [beep]. Along with the things that Dr. Higley accomplished was in  
55 medicine and he'd become quite a surgeon in the country, one time he removed the fingers and toes of an individual, a young man, that was badly frozen, probably saved his life. The building stands, it's fourteen miles west of Smith Center and nine miles north and then a half west again. It is made of logs and the, uh, building is part stone at that time, but it's, uh, an interesting place to see.

60 FIELDWORKER: Is there any, uh, argument about actually where the song was written? I thought when I came in this town just west of you had a sign that said "The Home of 'Home on the Range'"?

INFORMANT: Yes, the towns nearby contribute considerable labor, uh, in erect-, in reconstructing the building, and, it's owned and claimed eh, so far as the, the cabin itself is  
65 privately owned, but everyone here claims the cabin is a part of theirs. It doesn't, uh, belong to any one town but it really belongs to all the towns nearby.

FIELDWORKER: Oh I see, it's sort of a {mutual thing then.

INFORMANT: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm}, that's right.

70 FIELDWORKER: Well that seems to, uh, have been the thing that really made the early mark in Smith Center. What about, this was about the time of (Ripon) just after the homesteaders {started coming I guess.

75 INFORMANT: Yes}. Our county was, uh, (eligible) for homestead in sixty-seven, or rather sixty-eight probably. It was surveyed in sixty-seven, eighteen sixty-seven and the first, uh, homestead, uh, probably, uh, was taken and not recorded until about eighteen seventy. Really the, the group of farmers and, uh, people coming in was seventy-one and seventy-two. And the first, uh, county seat was, uh, location was appointed by the governor and three commissioners appointed by the governor so they could in turn hold election to, uh, to put the, uh, courthouse where it is now in the center of the county.

80 FIELDWORKER: Yeah, I heard at first wasn't there some disagreement, another {smaller town wanted it (for themselves).

85 INFORMANT: Yes, yes, Cedar}. Cedar was the town where part of it is in the south part of the county and the majority of the people, uh, thought the center of the county. One of the interesting things, and kinda rather laughable, the north part of the county, a resident there was so sure that it ought to be in the center of the county that their neighbors over in the nearby in Nebraska helped them out at the (xx) polling, or the vote. And even the north side was accused of, uh, even voting the horses and cattle by name. Then the county only had five townships, but, uh, three of the townships in the north part, or two rather, was thrown out at the first election.

FIELDWORKER: Oh, so there was some {real disagreement—

INFORMANT: There was some, yes, disagreement.} But no bloodshed.

90 FIELDWORKER: Mm-hmm. Well you were, a farmer yourself for many years.

INFORMANT: Yes, yes, I've spent my lifetime farming in Smith County. If I had my chosen occupation to again, I'd still be a farmer.

FIELDWORKER: Mm-hmm. What do you think of Smith Center now the city? It's grown quite a bit {I suppose.

95 INFORMANT: Well to me} it's the type of a city that, uh, I think re-, retired people, uh, enjoys. We have no manufacturing of any consequence, no group has any sizeable payroll, a retired person in this town, uh, can feel that uh, they're part of it. If we had, uh, uh, some big manufacturing plant or something like that that had a payroll of probably a thousand, we uh, we wouldn't feel like Smith Center was a part of our, our town. It'd be a different town. We'd almost  
100 be strangers in our own hometown.

FIELDWORKER: Yeah, you feel now that you're a part of it, {you contribute.

INFORMANT: Yes}.

FIELDWORKER: I notice at the Rotary it seemed to be quite a feeling of spirit.

105 INFORMANT: Yes, Rotary here is a service uh, group that's interested in everything that is for the betterment of uh, not only Smith Center, not only of Smith County, but it's nationally, uh, if we can be helpful to any group of people that's uh, that needs service, why we're glad to extend our helping hand.

FIELDWORKER: Mm-hmm. Well, on—oh, one other thing to mention was that you have one hobby and this is reading, do you do much of that?

110 INFORMANT: Yes, I like to read, uh, enjoy, I have my own library. And uh, I'm not uh, particularly interested in novels, I like to read historical material such as the *Heritage*, *National Geographic*, and, uh, books that, uh, on travel and on history.

FIELDWORKER: Has anything been done here, uh, about writing a history of the county or anything?

115 INFORMANT: Yes, we formed a historical society in, uh, in about forty-eight, I was president of it for three years. And uh, we had a project of, uh, writing the history of each township which we have twenty-five townships. Practically all of the townships uh, made an effort and uh, I think about twenty of the uh, histories uh, are uh, in the library at the Kansas State Historical So-, Association at Topeka. And, uh, we probably could do more if we exerted ourselves more.

120 FIELDWORKER: Yeah, if you'll go ahead and read that now.

INFORMANT: The story of Arthur the Rat. Once upon a time there was a young rat who couldn't make up his mind. Whenever the other rats asked him if he would like to come out hunting with them, he would answer in a hoarse voice, "I don't know." When they said, "Would you rather stay inside?" he wouldn't say yes or no either. He already shirked when making a choice. One fine  
125 day his aunt Josephine said to him, "Now look here. No one will ever care for you if you carry on like this. You have no more mind of your own than a greasy old blade of grass." The young rat cra-, coughed and looked wise as usual, but said nothing. "Don't you think so?" said his aunt, uh, stamping with her foot, for she couldn't bear to see the young rat so cold-blooded. "I don't know" was all he ever answered, and then he'd walk off to think for an hour or more whether he should  
130 stay in his hole in the ground or go out into the loft. One night the rats heard a loud noise in the loft. It was a very dreary old place. The roof let the rain come washing in, the beams and rafters had all rotted through, so the whole thing was quite unsafe. At last one of the joists gave way and the beam fell with one edge on the floor. The walls shook, the cupola fell off and all the rats' hair stood on end with fear and horror. "This won't do," said their leader. "We can't stay cooped  
135 up here any longer." So they sent out scouts to search for a new home. A little later on that evening the scouts came back and said they had found an old-fashioned horse barn where there

would be room and board for all of them. The leader gave the order at once, "Com-, company fall in," and the rats crawled out of their holes right away and stood on the floor in a long line. Just then the old rat caught a sight of young Arthur, and that was the name of the shirker. He wasn't in line, and he wasn't exactly outside it. He stood just by it. "Come on, get in line," growled the old rat coarsely. "Of course you're coming too." "I don't know," said Ar-, Arthur calmly. "Why the idea of it. You don't think it's safe here anymore, do you?" "I'm not certain," said Arthur undaunted, "The roof may not fall down yet." "Well," said the old rat, "we can't wait for you, you join us." Then he turned to the others and shouted, "Right about face, march." The long line marched out the barn while the young rat watched them. "I think I'll go tomorrow," he said to himself, "but then again, perhaps I won't. It's so nice and snug here. I guess I'll go back to my hole under the log for a while and just make up my mind." But during the night there was a big crash. Down came beams, rafters, joists and whole business. The next morning—it was a foggy day—some men came to look over the damage. It seemed odd to them that the old building was not haunted by rats. But at last one of them happened to move a board, and he caught sight of a young rat, quite dead, half in, half out of his hole. Thus the shirker got his due and there was no mourning for him.

140 FIELDWORKER: [bells ringing] OK. Well I want to thank you very much for this {contribution to my work.

145 INFORMANT: Well I enjoyed your}, your company and your project.

FIELDWORKER: All right, thank you.

INFORMANT: Kind of a holiday for me. I'm not busy, as long as I make myself busy and I hope you find a welcome in every county you can get into.

FIELDWORKER: I hope so.

160 INFORMANT: You don't know the name of the counties?